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**The Iowa Blind History Archive
History of Blindness in Iowa - Oral History Project
Interview with [Name]
Conducted by [Name]
[Date]
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**Bettina Dolinsek
Mary Clarke
Iowa Department for the Blind, Des Moines, IA**

Mary Clarke: I am meeting with Bettina Dolinsek at the Iowa Department for the Blind in Des Moines. The address is 524 4th Street, Des Moines, Iowa 50309. I know Bettina from my teaching experiences in the Adult Orientation Center. Bettina was one of my students years ago, and she's going

to be sharing a lot of her life experiences, both socially and educationally, from the time that she was a very small child to her adulthood. Bettina is it alright that I record this?

Bettina Dolinsek: Yes.

Clarke: I understand that you were adopted as a baby?

Dolinsek: Yes.

Clarke: Could you give me a little bit of an idea of how things were in those days?

Dolinsek: Sure, as much as I can recall. Of course, a lot of this was told to me when I was older. So, I was adopted when I was a baby. And, the cause of my blindness, I had cataracts and the doctor didn't remove those in time. He waited six months and I was supposed to have had them removed within six weeks. So, when he removed them later on it damaged my eyes; and I also had Glaucoma, so it was irreversible. There was nothing that they could do after that point to correct any vision that I would have had. It was difficult for my family because being adopted...when my father found out that I was blind and his mother, my grandmother, they at that point decided that, oh, you know, "We really don't need to have this kind of a problem in our family. We want to have the perfect kids, sighted, beautiful;" all this kind of stuff. So, they had said, "Why don't we go ahead and get rid of Bettina; put her in an institution. She can grow up with other kids that maybe have other disabilities or things like that, and we don't need this here." But, my Mom said no and said, "No, we've

adopted this child, so we're going to keep her and we're going to raise her and make a good environment." But, I was told growing up that that was my Grandmother's view. My Dad never came out and said it to me, but just the way that I was treated growing up, from him, indicated to me that he probably felt the same way. And, the reason I say that is because he...I just never did anything good enough. Everything could have been better. It just felt like in public and things I was just more of an embarrassment to the family than just treated like a normal child. I have a sister, who's also adopted, and she's sighted, and he treated her just differently than me. They were always really good friends. At one point, he said to me that he would have been fine just with her. So, those kinds of things indicated to me that he had the same feeling that my Grandmother had, who thought that I shouldn't be a part of the family. So, right from the get-go I knew I was different. I knew that there was something that was not quite the same as my sister. So, that's difficult to handle. You always feel like you don't measure up. You feel like you just don't have any confidence. You just don't feel kind of like part of the family at some points.

Clarke: Like low self esteem.

Dolinsek: Yeah, very low self esteem. And, that's something that I had to, throughout the years, work on and still continue to. It still sometimes rears its ugly head and that's something probably I'll deal with probably for my entire life. But, when I grew up, at age six I was hit by a car. So, a lot of my long-term memory I don't recall things. Now, I'm married and sometimes my husband tells me, "Hey we

did this when we first got married.” And I’m going, “Really?” So, sometimes I just don’t remember things as well.

Clarke: What was the situation when you were hit by a car? Were you crossing...

Dolinsek: I was crossing the street. I was crossing the street and was hit by a car, and so it obviously wasn’t safe.

Clarke: You didn’t have any alternative techniques at that time, or any blind techniques?

Dolinsek: No.

Clarke: Other people would not have known that you were unable to see?

Dolinsek: Right, yep. So, growing up in school it was definitely difficult because the other kids, they knew and they didn’t want to be playing on the playground with the kid that couldn’t do all of the games like softball and kickball, baseball or, you know, keep up with them or when the kids want to run out and play and stuff; you couldn’t do that. They knew there was a difference. So, even from the early age growing up in school was difficult because you were different. And, looking back then even throughout going from grade school to middle school to high school, you know, looking back, at that time, I felt like I was the victim. You know, people don’t want to give me a chance. You know, they’re embarrassed if we were walking together and I hang onto their arm, or they’re embarrassed if I have my cane. And, I’m not what they consider to be cool. But, at

the same time, looking back on those experiences, now, what I tend to think is that they also felt awkward about themselves. And, they wanted to have a certain appearance that they portrayed to their peers. So, everybody's concerned about their appearance and how they look with everyone else and, you know, you want to be the popular one; and so, I think that they also struggled with things like that, too. They were insecure as well. Sometimes I think to myself if I had the confidence that I have now back then, things probably would have been different.

Clarke: Different in what way?

Dolinsek: Well, I think that if I were...well, let me back up a little bit. In school I was shy. You know, I didn't really talk to many people. I didn't put out the effort to go up to somebody and say, "Hi, my name's Bettina. What's your name?" Just things that sometimes people encourage you to do. In school those were things that I was too shy to do. And, I think that that stems from when you're smaller, especially in grade school and maybe even middle school, you know, if kids see you with your cane, or if they see that you're a little bit different; they tend to notice those things and then to make themselves feel good about themselves, they might make fun of you. They want to get a crowd of kids laughing so they'll take your cane away from you and, "Oh you can't find it." You know what I mean? Things like that. So, it tends to make you feel even more insecure about yourself. So, just having those types of experiences; people stealing things from you and like I said, hiding your cane, telling you you're going the wrong way, you know, just things like, if you can't find your classroom, you know,

things like that. And then, people to get their friends laughing, would start making fun of you so it makes you a little bit more shy. But I think that, you know, now people grow up; they don't do things like that any more.

Clarke: Going back to your elementary school years, when did you start receiving training, like learning how to use the cane, or maybe did you learn Braille at that time?

Dolinsek: I started to learn Braille in grade school and I started to use a cane then. I'm not exactly sure which year I started doing those things. But, those were things that I started in grade school. I'm trying to think a pinpoint; I'm thinking either third grade or fifth grade, either one of those two was when I started to...I'm thinking it's third grade is when I started to learn those alternative techniques.

Clarke: So, prior to that, did you use Large Print or were you able to read print?

Dolinsek: I had, prior to that, the school system tried with Large Print because if you had any useable vision, even if it wasn't useable, you know what I'm saying?

Clarke: Yes, I know what you're saying.

Dolinsek: If you have light perception or if you could tell shadows and that's what I had; I had light perception and shadows and if colors were really bright I could tell. So, based on that, you know, they figured, well you can just use Large Print. Well, it wasn't effective; it didn't work. So, we had to go to a different format and different technique,

which was Braille. But, that was their absolute last resort, you know, the school system doesn't want to do those things. They didn't want you to use those techniques if you didn't have to.

Clarke: So, did that put you behind with regard to the other students?

Dolinsek: You know, I think it did. In some ways it did because learning that later on is basically like learning to read when the kids are learning in first grade; you're of course a couple of years behind. So, it did make it harder. But, once you were able to pick up those things then I was able to catch up pretty quickly with my peers. But, in those early years it definitely made it difficult because the other students were ahead. And so, that was something was definitely hard, too, because not only were you different but you also viewed yourself as stupid.

Clarke: Did your mother help you out at all at home?

Dolinsek: She tried. My Mom, unfortunately, she passed away when I was 14. She had cancer and so she always had...she was very ill my entire life. So, it was really hard for her to keep up with things like that but she would when she could. She really tried to do the best that she could for me. But, she passed away, like I said, when I was 14, which, in a way was kind of a blessing in disguise. It's hard to lose any parent at that age for any student or any person, but the problem with my Mom was that she wanted to be too protective. I didn't do chores around the house which, because of that, made my sister pretty, kind of resentful in a

way you know what I mean? “I have to do all this kind of stuff and you don’t have to.” You know what I’m saying?

Clarke: Yeah.

Dolinsek: And again, if I knew what I know now, then, I would have said, “Please, please I want to take out the garbage.” You know what I mean? What kid says that, though? (Laughter) Or I want to do the dishes. And, what would happen would be sometimes I would tell my Mom, “Oh I want to learn how to do these things, can you please teach me?” And so, she would try to but then she would lose her patience very quickly. So, what would take them maybe like five minutes to do would take me like a half an hour and they just wasn’t...that wasn’t something they wanted to put up with. But, anyway, after she had passed away then here I am in the house, laundry has to be done and it’s like what do I do? And so, I had to figure out, you know, mark the machines. You know, I had to have my sister tell me okay, where, you know what I mean. We had like a dial on the washing machine at that point, so if you do it like three clicks to the right or whatever, you know, you’re on normal and then you just hit the button.

Clarke: So, is your sister younger than you or older?

Dolinsek: No, she is six years older than I am. So, she is older than me so she had a lot more responsibility than I did. But, learning how to do those things after my Mom passed away took some time because I didn’t have to do anything; I didn’t have to do laundry; I didn’t have to cook, I didn’t have to clean. But, after she passed away, it was my Dad and my

sister and I and, you know, all of a sudden responsibility came to me because they weren't home. I was home a lot alone and so I'd have to figure out, well I have to go to school tomorrow, so I've got to have clothes to wear; or if I want to make dinner, this is what I have to do. When I was 16, my sister got married, so she, then, was no longer living at home and it was just my Dad and me and he wasn't there very much of the time at all. So, I had to...I had to figure out how to do things like cook and clean and just all the things that were duties around the house. So, learning those things, then, it was difficult. So, you know, having to figure out, Okay, how do I use the stove; how do I clean the house and how do I know when it's clean. You know, a lot of times I'd get down and feel the floor or feel the bathroom, the tub and things like that to make sure they were clean, but you know, there'd be a lot of times where I'd miss spots, you know, miss things, so just kind of figuring out how do I...how do I learn the alternative techniques to do those things.

Clarke: Trial and error?

Dolinsek: Yeah! So, when I got married I was, you know, hey that's no problem at all! (Laughter) But, growing up in high school, even in those days, it was definitely difficult.

15:00

Clarke: So what was your high school like; your high school experiences like?

Dolinsek: Well, I tried to break out of my shell a little bit more because I wanted to have friends and people to hang

out with and I did have a few people that I would go out with sometimes after school, or we'd have weekend plans or things like that, but it was really a mixed bag; some of it was good, you know, with some people that I hung around with. But, I also would have those friends outside of school, but during school they would join with the other kids and kind of tease...you know, tease me. Like I said, just different games they would play like hiding your cane from you, or in band class they would hide my instruments and I couldn't find them. You know what I mean? And, it would always be funny to them. So, to me that was really difficult because I thought they like me; if we're friends, why would you do these things? You know, because I look like an idiot up here just getting down on the floor to try and find my stuff. So, those things were hard. Those are really hard. I think its hard growing up and just not knowing if you fit in. You know, as all teenagers do, we cared about our appearance; we cared about what we wore, you know, and things like that and not knowing in a way, gosh, does my hair look good? (Laughter) Things like that. I know a lot of girls then were learning how to do makeup, and that's something that I didn't know how to do. And, honestly, in a way I didn't care. I couldn't see it, so why, you know what I mean? So, it didn't make a difference to me, but at the same time I wanted to be like all the other girls and I wanted to do those types of things; do my hair, do my makeup, have the right clothes, you know. So, when I didn't have that experience of knowing, okay, what's the latest style? And, I'd ask people; I'd ask my sister what are people wearing now, you know what I mean? Sometimes I'd have her...can you do my hair? I want to look good today, you know, things like that. Can you teach me how to do these

things because I want to do them for myself. So, those were struggles all the way throughout high school. And, one of the things that I remember, is when I would talk to people, older people, adults about those struggles, they would say to me, “Wait till you get to college; things will change. People grow up. They’re there because they want an education, so just wait.” And, I thought oh whatever! I’ve waited through all these years; I don’t think people are going to change.

Clarke: What did you do as far as your clothing? Did you shop for your own clothes?

Dolinsek: Not really, no; my sister did a lot of that. She would help me and then she would put the outfits together and then tell me what went with what. Today if I go shopping, I go on my own. I have people at stores that I know, so that’s really kind of nice. I’ve developed relationships with different clerks, so when I go into the store I’ll kind of have an idea of what I’m looking for and they’ll put things together for me, so that I’ll know that this shirt matches with these pants or this skirt, or whatever. And, what I try to do, though not always, because I don’t think I have to always buy neutral things, is but sometimes I’ll buy something that if I were to wear this pair of pants and a different shirt; it would still match...so that I don’t accidentally pair something together that wouldn’t match. So, I try to buy things that would be more versatile, and I like that because it’s practical, too. But, sometimes it’s fun to get something that’s just crazy.

Clarke: So, you said in high school that you played in band. What instruments did you play?

Dolinsek: I played a trumpet and a French horn.

Clarke: Oh, I played the French horn, too. So, how did you manage that with did you have Braille music?

Dolinsek: I memorized...I have never seen Braille music. I memorized. I would have the music on tape and then I had private teachers that would come into my home, and I would also go to one other teacher. So, I had two private teachers and I would spend time with the band director, so everything that I played I would have memorized.

Clarke: Wow!

Dolinsek: Yeah that was fun. I always wished I could have one of those ears that just picked it up. Oh, yeah I know that, no problem, but I didn't. I really had to work at it, but it was fun and I really enjoyed it. What was cool about that is that we'd never compete for any kind of competition, so our marching band was just for football games. And, also, we would do like parades and things like that. When we would go out on the field for a football game, our band uniforms had capes and so, what I would do...I would hold onto the person's cape in front of me and that way I could run out on the field with the rest of the band members. And then, when we practiced, we would know you're going to face forward and then take four steps and then turn to the right and then take, you know what I mean? So, you would learn the formations out on the field. But, that's how I would do it for

marching band on the field. And, I did have one funny story where I forgot what I was doing and the band went one way and I went the other, but it was fun. (Laughter)

Clarke: How did you get your way out of that one?

Dolinsek: I was told. Somebody ran over, “You’re in the wrong area!” “Oh, thanks!” But, the thing was, I didn’t want to deprive myself of that kind of an opportunity and I didn’t want to say, “Oh I have to sit in the stands and just play there,” when the other kids were on the field. I thought, my goodness, I want to be a part of this, too, so how can I make this adaptable for me. How can I do it? And, that’s how we’d do it and then, when I would march for parades, I would have somebody right next to me who would be like either one of the band directors. We had two band directors, so one of them would march next to me. And, they did march out there anyway with us so that wasn’t uncommon. And then, they would tell me, “We’re turning now,” or “We’re stopping,” or “Go ahead,” things like that so that way I’d know what to do.

Clarke: So, you pretty much took charge of your solutions to problems.

Dolinsek: I did.

Clarke: Rather than someone else dictating to you right?

Dolinsek: I did because I wanted to do everything else the other kids were doing. I also swam on our swim team as a freshman in high school. And, the only thing that I couldn’t

figure out an alternative technique for, and I'd still love to know, is when you reached the opposite end that you started from in the pool, people do a foot turn [correction: flip turn] at the end and then kick off the wall, but I didn't know when the end was coming. So, I never knew when to start into that foot turn [correction: flip turn] and so, that would be interesting to figure out if anybody knows how to do that or has a technique for that. But, I learned how to dive, not anything fancy, just to get in the water. (Laughter) But, I learned all those things and I learned how to keep up with the other girls. And then, I was in track and I threw the shot-put and discus. So, I was still able to be a part of those teams, just doing different things, because I wanted to be with my peers. What I wanted to do was show them, "Hey, I'm just a normal kid just like you guys." You know, I maybe do things differently, but I'm just like you guys. So I tried, you know, if I had an interest in it, I'd go for it. If I didn't, I wouldn't.

Clarke: Did your Dad show any interest at this, when you were in sports, band?

Dolinsek: No, he never came. No, he'd come maybe to a concert here and there. One time he came to the concert and left. So, like, I was going where's my ride? But, that's okay. It actually, honestly at that point, I felt more comfortable for him not to be there for me. You know, going home and being told, "Well you could have done that differently." You know, instead of, "Hey, you did a good job," or whatever.

Clarke: Encouragement?

Dolinsek: Yeah, so sometimes it felt better for me not to have him there.

Clarke: How did you manage things, classes like science and math?

Dolinsek: Those were very difficult. Math was something I struggled with. I'm trying to think of alternative techniques that I would use for those classes. I remember one time, wanting to take a chemistry class and the teacher told me, "If you take this class, I will fail you."

Clarke: Oh my!

Dolinsek: I wish, again, I knew a lot about what I know now, then, because I would have fought that; I would have gone further and said, "You know we need to figure out a way that I can still participate in the group," because a lot of what that was, was lab work. And, a lot of my science classes were also lab work, but the other teachers, you know, you'd be teamed up with somebody like...let's just say, for example, we had to go out and collect different types of leaves for a project or different kinds of things outside for like a life science or a science course, you know. We would be teamed up with somebody and my participation would, a lot of time, be the one taking notes. You know, they would go gather it. I would go with them outside, but they could see it and they would get it and show it to me and then I would understand what it looked like, but then I would, you know, take the notes. And, I would then, you know, help put that together, maybe in a presentation, you know, they

would do more of gathering the things and, again, I would go with them, but maybe I would be the one talking about it. So, I'm still taking an active part in the class but just a little bit different. A lot of times that's how things work even now. If you're on a project with somebody, maybe there's something that you can't do. So, what you do is you figure out something else. Okay, I'm still going to be part of the group; I'm still going to pull my weight; I'm still going to do these things, but this is the way that I can do them. So, you'd figure out that alternative technique. So, that's a lot of times what I would do for classes, especially ones that involved a lot of visual...since I wasn't able to participate in those classes the same way in some ways but I'd figure something out.

Clarke: What did you do for, like, social activities while you were in high school?

Dolinsek: Well, one of the groups that I belonged to in high school was the FCA, which is Fellowship of Christian Athletes and that was fun, because it got me out and involved with other students in schools. We would meet every Wednesday night. One Wednesday night you'd have a Bible study, and then the next Wednesday night you'd do a fun activity like bowling or golf, mini-golf and things like that. And, I was always nervous about those activities because I thought to myself, how am I going to figure this out and not look like an idiot in front of all these kids? (Laughter) And, you know, part of me really worried about that; really worried about, okay, what am I going to look like in front of all these kids? But then, the other part of me thought, I don't care; I want to do this. I'm excited about

being out there and being with everyone else. So, with bowling, for example, and this is the same technique I use now, is I would have somebody stand behind me and help line me up in the middle and then before I would throw the ball I would walk ahead and count the steps to where the alley started and then I would throw the ball. I know they have rails; I've used that too but I've never had enough strength in my one hand to just hold the ball with one hand. (Laughter)

Clarke: Maybe you had too heavy of a ball. (Laughter)

Dolinsek: That could be, but that's how I found a technique for that. Mini-golf, that was hard but, you know. I did it; just hit the ball and hope for the best and kind of figure out, maybe one person would stand where the hole was and they would hit it with their stick.

Clarke: To give you an auditory clue.

Dolinsek: Yeah and say, "Here it is. It's maybe ten feet away from you," or "It's fifteen feet away from you." So then, I would hit the ball and, you know, that's how I knew how hard I had to hit it. It took a long time to figure out, you know, to get it in the hole, but I was still out there doing it and that, to me, that's all that mattered. It didn't matter that I was the best; I didn't want to be the best. I just wanted to be out there with the other kids.

Clarke: Just have that experience.

Dolinsek: Exactly, have that experience. Now, I know sometimes after school a group of kids would want to go out and maybe go out for a burger or pizza or movies and stuff like that, and sometimes they'd tell me, "Oh, well, we don't have enough room in the car." So, you knew, okay, alright, I get it. Sometimes they would let me go but it just...it probably depended on who was there, what was going on. Sometimes they wanted to; sometimes they didn't.

30:00

Dolinsek: And, I think that honestly, looking back now, I think that that's how it is for all kinds of teenagers. I think sometimes they're included; sometimes they're not; just the way it goes, but then it didn't feel like that. Then it felt like...

Clarke: Like you were shut out.

Dolinsek: Yeah, exactly, like you were shut out; just not part of the group. So, when graduation came after high school I don't really have any connections with anybody that I went to school with.

Clarke: While you were still in high school, didn't you do some summer program with the Department?

Dolinsek: I did; there was a couple summer programs that I participated in. The first one that I went to was the World of Work, and that was set at the UNI campus, Cedar Falls, I think. I get my "Falls" mixed up. (Laughter) I'm from Iowa and I don't even know.

Clarke: Well, there's like Sioux Falls, Cedar Falls and...

Dolinsek: I know like Cedar Rapids and all these, like, I don't know where's it at. But, what that program was...and I really think that was a really neat program because it really started me thinking about having a job and I did have a job in high school, and I'll talk about that in just a moment, after I talk about the program. But, what the program did was you got a job and my job was I worked at Taco Bell. And, what it was teaching you was to go to work every day, to manage money, you know you got your pay check and that was what money you had. They planned activities that we would do. There were other blind kids in the program, but what you had to do was learn how to manage your life. Okay, I work Monday through Friday and I work these specific hours and then afterward they would say, "Well Tuesday from ten until twelve, we're going to go do this." Well, if I'm working from ten to twelve, I'm not able to participate in that activity, which really is a great life lesson because that does happen. When you have a job other things are going on around you, but what's your first priority? My first priority is coming to work every day and making sure that I can provide for myself. So, back then it would be a real life lesson because you knew, okay, well, if they're having an activity every week that's kind of in the middle of my work day, I can't ask for that off every week. It's just not the way the work world works. So, you were learning to manage money, your life, working; we would do our grocery shopping, so we'd go and buy groceries for the week; we would prepare our own meals. We had people training us on how to prepare, how to make a list, how to go to the store, pick out the items. Now,

at the World of Work Program it was different from a Department for the Blind program because they would take you to the store and you would Braille out your list and then they would walk with you; they'd pull the cart and you'd hang onto the cart and so, they would go down the aisles and you would read off the items and then they would find it and put it in your cart. So, in a way that was teaching you how to make a list and how to go to the store and how to read off the list. But, at the Department for the Blind you made your list, you went to the store, you took the bus, you know, you asked for help. So, it was just much different; more of a real life experience here doing it from the Department than there because they would pretty much do everything for you.

Clarke: You're more in charge of how things evolved.

Dolinsek: Exactly, you were in charge of how you were going to get there. You were in charge of picking out your own items. And, one thing I still do is if I go shopping and I have somebody help me, I'll say I need lettuce, they'll pick it up; I'll say, "Let me see that," because I want to know what my produce looks like. You know, they don't care; they're just going to grab whatever and throw it in the cart, but I will ask, "Let me see...can I see it please," and check it out and, you know, maybe it feels wilted on top and I don't want that one or I'll just say, "Where's the bin," and I'll go shuffling around through it and grab my own. So, in that regard you are taking more charge of what you are buying at the store and, you know, the person was helping you by walking you through the aisles and showing you where the

items were, but you took charge in regards of which one you wanted.

Clarke: So, you said you had two summers that you worked at Taco Bell. Did you work any place else?

Dolinsek: I did not. I just worked at Taco Bell at the World of Work program, and I only attended the World of Work Program once.

Clarke: Oh, just once.

Dolinsek: Just once, and then I came to a summer program here at the Department for the Blind.

Clarke: Going back, you said that you did have a job, though.

Dolinsek: I did in high school. I did. I worked at a nursing home. I was in charge of going to each person's room and removing the old towels and wash cloths and putting up new ones for them. And then, I was in charge of cleaning up the dining rooms after they were done eating in the evenings. So, washing the tables, mopping the floor, sweeping and mopping the floor, which is something that was, you know, after a few times, I figured it out but that was kind of hard to figure out how am I going to make sure this whole floor is clean? What are the techniques that I'm going to do, but I wanted to keep my job; I wanted to do a good job. I didn't want them to come back and say, "We have to redo this; the blind person can't get it." I wanted to make sure that they

knew that when they hire me I was going to do a good job for them.

Clarke: So, how did you come about getting that job?

Dolinsek: I had a friend that actually worked there and I talked to her about wanting to get a job and she says, “Hey I work at this Holy Spirit Nursing Home in Sioux City,” and she asked if...she said “We’re looking for somebody to do maintenance and also changing towels and things,” and she asked if I’d be interested. I said, “Yeah, you know, why not, its experience.” So, I took that job and I worked there for about a year and just did those different things. I never did anything else at the nursing home, but one thing I did they didn’t care for was when the residents went to talk to me I would do it; I would visit with them. And, they just said, “You’re here to work; you’re not here to socialize.” That was hard, though because I hated to, you know, they’re in their room, you know, so...but I enjoyed that job. I worked there for about a year and then I had another friend who had opened up her own store, kind of company thing called Jungle Jubilee and it was like a Discovery Zone. So, it’s where kids would go in the ball pit and on all the slides and all sorts of fun things. And, I worked in the kitchen. So, I would help prepare food and I would help to fill the ice containers. I did more of the behind the scenes things. I didn’t take orders; I didn’t do the cash register. I didn’t do any of that part, but in the back I’d be helping prepare salads or just whatever type work had to be done. But, that was a good experience, too, and I worked actually there until I started coming to the orientation center after high school. It was a good work experience; it’s good to get out

there because it really reassured to me that you have to work. I don't have an option. This is what I do. When I get out of high school and the plan, then, was to go to college and then after college I would get a job. And, I honestly didn't think there was any other option. So, for me getting a job was just the way it was going to be and so that's what I did. When I was done I did; I got a job and I've worked steady ever since I was 19.

Clarke: Now, when you left high school, did you have any idea of what you wanted to go into or whether you were going to go on to college or...I know that you entered the Orientation Center into the program at the Orientation Center, could you tell a little bit about that?

Dolinsek: I was here from September of '95 to May of '96, so I did the full nine month program, learned alternative techniques. I think one of the biggest things that I walked away with was building my own self confidence and feeling like I could, when I was done with the program, go out and find a job or go to college or do whatever I wanted to do. I think before coming in there, I did have those hesitations, you know. What if this, what if that, you know, the questions would just go through your mind. But, coming here and taking the classes and, I think, one of the biggest helpers was probably business, because we got to talk out all of those things that we all thought. And then, we would have other people come back and say yeah, but what about this? Well I didn't think about that. So, it's really good to have that opportunity to talk with different teachers here. And, the teachers were always willing if you ever wanted to talk to them, if you had a problem and you needed to talk to

somebody in confidence; they were always willing to do that. You know that, Mary, we did a lot of talking. So, to me that was one of the biggest helps was walking away with the confidence to know that I could make it.

Clarke: I think, too, knowing that you're not alone in thinking some of the things you're thinking or feeling. Some of the things you are feeling, you know, thinking that you're not weird or alone. (Laughter)

Dolinsek: Exactly. You know, and that really does help because sometimes when you're going through something that's all you think about is, "Gosh I'm the only one," but in reality you're not the only one; you're not the only one going through whatever it is. So, it's neat to go through a class of people who have the same things and you know what, like I said before, I don't really keep in contact with anyone from high school but I do keep in contact with people I went to Orientation with; I married one! (Laughter)

Clarke: So, where did you go after the Orientation Center? Where did your life experiences take you?

Dolinsek: Well, the plan after Orientation Center was to start college, and I did. I started at DMACC in Ankeny, and I had a roommate, and she and I were both going to the same college. She was on a different path of study than I was. And, we had gotten an apartment so we didn't live on campus. So, we started there. Halfway through the year she decided that, nope this wasn't for her and she left. She just packed up; one day I came home and she was gone.

Clarke: Oh no!

Dolinsek: Yes, gone. So, what happened was all the rent from the apartment fell on me. I was also, at the time, working part-time at McDonald's in West Des Moines. So, I was already hiring drivers to go back and forth to work and to school, you know, paying my half of the rent and my half of the utilities, but now everything fell on me. So, what I had decided to do was to work full-time because I needed to pay the bills. So, I decided what I'm going to do is work full-time for the next semester and then enroll back into college and have a job; hopefully have a job and go to college pretty much in the same area, like if I was living in Ankeny, see if the McDonald's there would hire me. You know, transfer from West Des Moines to Ankeny and then attend DMACC there. They'd be closer together. It would be easier to get back and forth. So, that's what I thought, but I started working full-time at the McDonald's out in West Des Moines and I actually had found an apartment out there, so I'd moved in and was working and just living and then that December I got married. So, we decided...my husband wanted to go to college as well, so we decided that that's fine, he can go ahead and go to college and then I would wait and when he was done I would go. He's still not done!

Clarke: I was going to say that; he still...

Dolinsek: He's still not done; he's getting his masters, now, which I'm very proud of. But, it's been good. And, I worked at McDonald's and as I talked about before when I worked at the Jungle Jubilee, I would do a lot of the food prep there but I never worked with the cash register. Well, going there,

I thought, why can't I? So, I actually took...their cash register was flat. It had a little bit of a like a bump where the button would be, but for the most part, it was just flat. So, what I did was I took the top, the sheet that had everything written down on it. It would say like hamburger, cheese burger and whatever; I took that and I had...I made Braille labels and I put on each one of those spots, so I could stand at the drive through and take orders using that Braille overlay. That whole store was Brailled. It was pretty cool. I had the Braille overlay, I had the soda dispenser in the back where I would get sodas for people and hand them out the window through the drive through, that was all Brailled; the bins where the food was, was all Brailled; I knew which compartment had hamburgers, cheese burgers, Big Macs, you know, you name it; I knew where to find it.

Clarke: Did you take this upon yourself to Braille all of that?

Dolinsek: I did because when they first hired me they thought, well, you can make drinks for our busy time.

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Dolinsek: Because, at that time, they didn't have the drink station where people got their own, so they said you can make drinks and that was all I could do. And, I thought, "No, I want to do more." And so, we talked about and I said, you know...and I pushed for it and I really wanted to do more, so I advocated for myself and I said, "I can do more. I want more responsibility and I want more hours." Well, then I did the Braille for the overlay. I said, "I can do this." And so, I put the Braille on the overlay and put it on the cash register

in the back. And so, I was taking orders. So then, what I would do is I would do two things, I would make the drinks for the busy time and then after that lunch rush was gone, then I would go back to the drive through and I would take orders. So, that made my hours a little bit longer and it gave me another duty. Well, that wasn't good enough for me still, so I said, "Hey we've done this. You've saw I can do this. What about if I were to do this morning and evening, before lunch and after lunch and that would give me a full eight hour day?" Well, then they said, "Well," and...I said, I could also hand things out the window, so I would also take orders but then maybe when it got slow and they didn't need two people on the registers, that one person could do that but I could hand things out the window. So, I talked them into doing that and that was fine and we did that. Then, you know, the orders were pretty easy to remember, you know, it would be like a number one meal with a coke, you know, a number two with this. So, I asked them I said, "I want to Braille all the food bins where you keep the french-fries and you keep all the hamburgers and things like that, and what I want to do is, I want to start putting together the orders for the person to hand out the window. They thought I was crazy. I said, "No I can do this; give me a chance." So, we did that. So, when it was slow because if it's too busy I couldn't remember all of them and the sighted people that worked there could look up at a screen and see it. So, when it was slow, you know, I would do that. I talked myself into running the grill and it was great. And, I would call back what we needed; I'd go up and, you know, I could feel in there and I'd say, "We're low on hamburgers, you know, six more," or whatever. So, I talked myself into doing pretty much everything in that store; everything that I wanted to do

to wiping down tables, to taking orders. I'd even stand at the front counter. That did become difficult because I did have a money reader but they were so slow back then that it just, you know, I'd get a twenty dollar bill and I'd put it in this thing and we'd wait, you know, ten minutes. Then you'd have to learn how to do math in your head. (Laughter) But, it was an experience for me and I did it a few times and I liked it and it really showed them, too, if somebody wants an opportunity and they're willing to do the hard work for it and I was. I Brailled everything; I made all my own accommodations, let them do it; let them do it. So, that was a real good experience for me and I really enjoyed working there but, you know, I'd done that for a few years and I decided that I wanted to make more money and do something different.

So, after working there then I went to a company down town that's no longer here called Neodata. And, there what we were doing was calling people to see if they wanted to order Jovaya coffee. They had canceled and now we wanted them back. And, I tell you one thing, I started doing that and I do not like sales. I don't like calling people; I don't like doing that at all, but, again, it was another good experience. And, for the equipment there, what we would use is a refreshable Braille display along with JAWS on the computer, so when the person on the other end picked up the phone, they would have no idea that that's how I was reading their name and saying, "Is this so and so?" And then, I would tell them...and then I could use those things on the computer then to choose yes they want to sign up again; they want this package, you know, whatever we were offering at the time. So, those were two alternative techniques that I could use to do that job that the

Department for the Blind would come out and they set that up at the work site. And, I still use those things to this day in the job that I'm currently doing. But, I take those items and I moved into another position there working for Proactive Solution.

What that was; it was a little different. I didn't do the calling; the calls were coming to me, which made it a lot nicer because people weren't angry; you didn't interrupt them during dinner. So, people would call in and they'd say, "I want to order this or that," or "I want to sign up for the products," and so then, using JAWS and the refreshable Braille I was able to accomplish those things that they would want me to do. And, one of the things that some people think about, though, is that you'd be slower than everybody else, but actually I worked right along side with them and some people I was much faster getting, you know, using the computer and getting around on it so that I could place those orders.

After working at Neodata, I then started working at Sears Credit out in West Des Moines; same type of thing, just answering questions about credit cards, much more information to look at, but using still JAWS and the refreshable Braille is what I used to do it at that job. That job I worked at as a customer service representative and then I was promoted to a help line person, which is if you call a company and say you want to talk to your supervisor, that's what I got to do. So then, I worked there and then after working at Sears Credit, I started working at Principle Financial as a benefit specialist. And, there people would call...doctor's offices mainly and dentist office and people looking at their vision insurance; they would call in and I would quote their benefits. So, they were going to go to the

hospital to have an MRI and they said, "How is this covered," and I would say, you know, "Your deductible..." and go from there. So, that's what I did there. I had a bad experience at Principle Financial. It was the first time I had been hired on a job and then they let me go. But, the thing about it was they said that they let me go because of my...I wasn't fast enough and the equipment that I had on my computer wasn't allowing me to be fast enough. But, the thing was is that every day we'd get a list that would be sent out and it would show the people who were the...who had the top scores; I was always in the one or second spot every day. But, what happened was Principle was moving to a new type of software on their computers that we had tested with JAWS and it was not accessible. So, the solution was to get rid of the problem, not to fix the problem; and that was really hard. That took me back down to a place I hadn't been in a long time; feeling inadequate, you know, having low self esteem; I couldn't do this job. I'd never been let go before. What am I going to do now? Will anybody hire somebody that's been let go, you know, all of those things. And then, after working there, I had actually stepped back into working at the proactive position at Central, they called it at the time. And, that was hard, too, because I went to a lower pay; I went back to something I'd done before. I felt like I stepped back ten times. It was a difficult place to be. And then, I actually started, after working there for four months, I actually started working here at the Department on the switchboard and that was wonderful. I honestly can't say enough about working here. I absolutely love it! And, I worked on the switchboard for three years, and now I'm a secretary up in Field Op.

Clarke: I think you did some secretarial work, probably, too, while you were on the switchboard didn't you?

Dolinsek: I did. You know, honestly, when I took on that job, you know, I knew my job duties would be answering and directing phone calls, helping people that came through the door to what they needed to do, just different things like that; anybody who comes through that front area, helping them to go in the direction that they needed to. And, of course, just like it is true to me, that wasn't enough for me. So, I started looking all over the Department, "Anybody need help?" I had the library machines down there, I was updating and packaging up those machines and I took on sending out, you know...we're going to have a jean day, and making the stickers for the jean day. And, I started entering payroll, and I started, you know, people would need things put into Braille, so Curtis was teaching me about how to use Duxbury. So, I was getting little projects like, "Hey this letter needs to be put into Braille, can you do that?" "Oh, sure." So, I was doing that and just anything people would bring to me to do. I was sending out calendars. I wanted to be busy, busy, busy, and I really enjoyed that. So, I would take on any project anybody asked me. I had some of the teachers say, "You know, these recipes need to be made into large print and then to be put into Braille, could you do that?" "Sure, I can." Sometimes, and I wish I could think of something, but sometimes somebody would ask me to do something and I'd say, "Sure, I can." Oh, boy I don't know if I can do that, but I'd figure it out and that's just the way I...that's just my personality. I'll say yes, and then I'll figure it out. And, sometimes I'd have to call other people here who'd been here for longer than me, or who have had more

experience than me. I'd say, "Hey I took on this project I'm not really sure what I'm doing do you have any advice?" And people, "Oh, sure," you know, and they'd tell me and that really helped me for the next time, because I would take that to the next thing that I did.

So, yeah, I always kept myself busy there, and then when a position up in Field Operations opened up as a secretary I applied for that, and as I understand it, I'm the first blind person to be a secretary in Field Operations. So, that's pretty exciting. It's fun. I'm learning new ways of doing things. You know, some people might put together letters, and we'll put together a letter and then you'll have to make a copy of it and file it and things like that. And so, other secretaries might be able to let those, you know, I have ten letters to do, so I'm going to do them all then I'll go to the copy machine; then I'll put it in filing. Well, you know, that's not going to work for me because I need to do them one at a time otherwise they might get out of place for filing or if I have to mail it out, it might get out of place. I might mail the wrong one to the wrong person, so my alternative technique is just doing them one at a time, which is fine. It works for me; it makes it so I'm independent. I know how to put things together and I also have someone come in, a reader, that comes in and works with me and so, I'm in charge of that still. And, I'll have a pile of things and I'll say, "Okay, we need to go through these things," whatever needs to be done with them. So, I found my own ways of getting around different things that we weren't sure about how to do and I'm always learning something new all the time.

Clarke: I think that is so important that people learn to get into that mind frame of adapting, that there's not just one

way to do something. In the Orientation Center we can sometimes show one or two different ways of doing something, but that's only kind of as a takeoff point.

Dolinsek: Yeah, it just gives you tools to say, "Here's an idea," but it's giving you the tools to then say to yourself, I want to walk away from this experience having the tools to help myself.

Clarke: Right. And, I was thinking of, back to McDonald's, you also opened the door for other people because they now have experienced your way of doing things and so, another blind person coming in for a job will have an easier time getting a job at that McDonald's than they would have otherwise. So, in a lot of ways you kind of opened the door for other people.

Dolinsek: And you know, even now, to this day, if there's anything that I want to do I'll do it. Last year I wanted to learn how to play golf, so a friend of mine who likes to play golf went out with me and we were on the driving range and after I got the hang of it, I was hitting the ball, like two hundred yards. So, you know, it's just taking and not being afraid. Taking that initiative and saying, "I want to learn how to do this," and then figuring out how to find either someone in sports that can teach you or, you know, one of the biggest, daunting things to me, too, was when the Jordan Creek Mall opened; it was huge. We went there for the first time with a student through our Transition program here at the Department and we said, "Hey, we want to show them that if you want to do these types of things, just do it." We were lost for hours, but it didn't matter. I said, "It

doesn't matter," and I told the student that. I said, "I know we're lost but the thing is we're not lost; I mean we're inside the building." It's not like anything's going to happen, but the point is that every time you do this it's going to become easier. And, that really happened. We go there now all the time and we still get lost, but not as bad and it's not horrible.

Clarke: And, you have more landmarks that are familiar to you. (Laughter)

Dolinsek: Yeah. You know where certain things are. I know where Starbucks is. You know, I know where certain things are and certain people get to know us and I think that's really neat, too, that the public can see blind people out there doing everyday things, and they can see that we're just a part of society as they are. And, that if I want to go out to dinner or tell friends, "Hey I'll meet you out here to eat." I can do that. And, sometimes it becomes daunting because if it's a really busy restaurant you're thinking how am I going to find them?

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Dolinsek: They're here, but how am I going to figure it out? But, you just take that deep breath and you walk in and you call them on your cell phone. (Laughter) You just figure out; you just call them or you just ask the person at the front, "I'm with party so and so," and they take you to them. That's how everybody does it. So, it's just really taking that initiative; just getting out there and living your life to the fullest. And, one of the things that's true that I have made a

motto for myself is I want to live a full life, or do I want to live a mediocre life? If I want to live a full life, I'm going to get out there and do whatever I want to do; and that's what I want to do. So, that's my whole thing is just being who I am. So that's just the way I live.

We own our own home and we have people come and mow for us and shovel for us. You know, our neighbors help us with that but then we do something for them. We don't have a car, so they can store all their stuff in our garage. (Laughter) But, you know, it's a give and take. You know, hey they're like, "We'll mow for you," and you know, during the winter we hold their summer stuff off and on.

Clarke: It kind of goes back to that one comment you made, being part of a team, that there are some things that you can't do or perhaps that are not accessible to you; but then, there's other things that you can, so you do the things that you can and other people do the other things. And so, the mowing the yard, maybe that's something that...I mean there are people that do mow the yard, but mowing the yard is maybe not one thing that you want to tackle; that's alright. But then, in turn you do something for someone else.

Dolinsek: Right. I do something; I provide a service for them that they would have otherwise had to pay for. We have somebody's car in our garage because it's a spare; it's a fun sports car that they had, but during the winter they can't use it. So, we got the space, "Come on, go ahead and put it in there; don't pay for..." if we can provide that to you, but in return they say, "Hey, we'll cut your grass."

Clarke: Yeah, that's great; that frees you up to do something else.

Dolinsek: Exactly. So, it's really give and take, but I think that's with anybody. There are certain things that some people are good at that other people aren't. It's not I'm blind and therefore I have to have all these particular rules around me; no, it's just working as part of a community; that's what I think.

Clarke: Anything else you can think of you wanted to add yet?

Dolinsek: Not at this time. I think that we've kind of gone through the whole gambit and it's really been enjoyable; it's been fun!

Clarke: This has been awesome! I really have enjoyed talking with you today.

Dolinsek: Well, I've been looking forward to it too, so I'm just thrilled that you asked me to, so thank you.

Clarke: You're welcome!

1:03:16

(End of Recording)

Beverly Tietz

4-1-11